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ABSTRACT

The fact that students have not learned to listen may be the reason some of them cannot write. Listening is an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalization that reading and writing demand. The following three exercises were designed to make students conscious of themselves as active listeners who create the voices they hear as they read/listen and write/listen. In the first exercise students were asked to retell the story of "1984," and in the process learned some lessons about composing: (1) strategies of organization--beginnings, middles, ends--are not set by the form of the narrative itself, but developed by them as they retell the story; (2) general and specific ideas occur naturally as they both tell details of the story and attempt to move to the next point by generalizing; and (3) retellings of the same plot can take many forms. The second lesson was begun by an oral reading of Dorothy Parker's "You Were Perfectly Fine," and the students were to listen for details and generalities to use in retelling the story. In the third lesson the story of King Lear was told to the students, and they were asked to listen and retell it. Then they were asked to write a sentence or two that generalized what they felt about what the writer-voice seemed to tell them. The experiment taught students that listening is composing; what people listen for determines the form, style, and content of the responses they write. (EL)

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LISTENING AS AN ACT OF COMPOSING

We present this paper together today because we work together and think about these ideas together. (Indeed, many of our friends tease us, insisting that we can't do anything apart.) We began to explore the idea of listening as essential to basic writers in 1983 while we were team-teaching English 098, the most basic level of basic writing at the University of Louisville. The students in this course are the most unskilled beginners, unprepared even for the regular developmental sequence. In fact, we created English 098 precisely to give these students a psychological advantage--to keep them out of the deadly cycle of failing remedial English semester after semester. They reminded us of the most poignant of Shaughnessy's students, those who "shouldn't be allowed in the university," as their detractors complain. Yet they are smart--we could tell that by their speech. They are at home with talk and banter, that's for sure. But that facility does not necessarily transfer to the other language arts--reading, writing, or even listening.

We focus on listening simply because it is the most neglected of the language arts. In the last several years, repeated calls for a new integration of reading, writing, and speaking have changed our approaches to teaching composition. We encourage more talk in the classroom because cognitive psychologists have stressedthe crucial developmental relationship between speaking and writing. We pay more attention to our students as readers because psycholinguists and literary response critics have demonstrated that reading is as much an act of composing as writing. A revival of interest in the history of rhetoric has led

us to re-apply classical models, where students continually read, imitated, recited, rewrote, and discussed their own and others' work. However, despite the emphasis on our students' revolving roles and readers, writers, and speakers, little attention has been paid to them as listeners, except perhaps in a negative way--"my students don't listen."

We agree that students don't listen well. And, as Shaughnessy taught us, one of the things that writing teachers do all the time is try to figure out reasons for students' lack of skill. So, we asked ourselves--what is a listener? What does a listener do? We began simply by positing that a listener is one who hears "voices." Those voices may be spoken or written, one's own or another's. Since we knew our students had trouble hearing those voices,we decided to change our orientation toward the relationship of the language arts. Instead of saying that basic writing students can't write because they don't read, perhaps it's because they haven't learned to listen.

In One Writer's Beginnings, Eudora Welty supports the idea that listening is primary:

> Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers--to read as listeners--and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write.

> The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me....
>
> My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make changes. I have always trusted this voice.

Clearly our students are not this conscious, either of a reader-voice or a writer-voice. The exercises Hepsie will describe are designed to enhance such an awareness. We decided that recognizing the voices in any text, read or heard, was an essential part of interaction and possibly, as Welty says, the impetus for writing or rewriting. If you can't hear, you can hardly respond. And we found our students singularly unable to respond to texts they read, or even to "see" what was on the pages of their own drafts.

Richard Larson recently suggests that readers interact with texts not by seeing them, but through hearing them. In "The Rhetoric of the Written Voice," he claims that auditory appeal makes a reader want to "keep company" with a text:

> I am suggesting that our experience of a written text--the transactions in which we participate with a writer when we read--has elements of a dramatic encounter; it includes a response by the reader's imagination--his or her auditory imagination--to the sounds heard during this imagined encounter with the text. I am suggesting that part of our response as readers is to the way we <u>hear</u> a text in our imagination and that every written utterance we encounter has its own imagined sound to which we as readers respond.

The listening response that Larson describes is dramatic and active, not the passive stance that teachers have assumed in their students. When we have thought about listening at all, we have described it too literally, as decoding words in order to get to meaning. We expect students to listen to teachers, to classmates, to assignments and sift from those "texts" the information that tells them how to complete a writing task. However, we may not have recognized that such sifting is an active process, requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalization that reading and writing demand. Our exercises are designed to make students conscious of themselves as active listeners who create the voices they hear as they read/listen and write/listen. Eudora Welty, again, describes this critical distinction between active and passive listening:

> Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening <u>for</u> them is something much more acute than listening <u>to</u> them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening children know stories are <u>there</u>. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole.

We wanted our students to become these sort of anticipating listeners and to be conscious of listening <u>for</u>, for the unspoken as well as the spoken meaning. We also wanted to instill in them some of the sense of drama that both Welty and Larson describe--the playful encounter with language that is missing in too many classrooms.

Besides learning to hear and respond to the voices in the air and on the page, learning to listen <u>for</u> helps students practice the skills they need for composing, as both readers and writers. Listeners must predict what is

coming in order to make sense of what is immediate; they must revise those expectations in light of what they are hearing; above all, they must generalize from what they hear, finding categories in order to fit the sounds into long-term--without overloading short-term--memory. In short, they must make what they hear meaningful. Listening for, then, can give students some sense of control over what they might want to write.

Beyond that, becoming aware of themselves as listeners who create meaning can help students think of themselves as meaning-makers when they write. Basic writing students, particularly, tend to see only the surface of their own writing and get stuck in a passive stance toward their own texts, not listening to the voices they have created. Hepsie will describe how we tried to make our students conscious of what Welty and Larson say that experienced readers and writers do unconsciously. In short, we wanted our students to learn to hear the reader-voice in external texts, so that it might become internal in their own texts--so that they might hear their own writer-voice as they compose and revise.

Of course, what we hope for from all our writing students is that they attend to their writer-voices as they compose and their reader-voices as they edit and revise. Teaching these students to listen for those voices as they are read to and as they read and comment aloud allows the external to become internal and functional as students write. As students find themselves beginning with expectations, making predictions, deriving and challenging generalizations, in the immediate aural medium, they learn what listening for means and learn how to transfer those auditory skills to their own writing.

How to accomplish this transfer from external listening to internal listening and how to teach students to listen for rather than listen to are points I want to approach in this more practical part of our discussion.

The English 098 students we team-taught could be identified easily on a placement test by their lack of facility in using the written word. Their prose was characterized by serious syntactical problems--inability to use normal word order consistently, lack of attention to verb forms and sentence boundaries. They often encountered difficulty in generating even a page of writing. We also discovered that many of our students who reasd their own work aloud would not truly read but comment upon what they had written with statements like "I start out by--" or "And then I say." These comments demonstrated their discomfort with their own writer voices. As their oral marginalia often indicated, however, these students were fluent as they spoke. Our attempt was to help them take their oral facility into writing.

The first exercise in listening for was one that asked students to retell the story of 1984 . It was 1984, and students had written their first diagnostic assignment about what terrible punishment Big Brother could threaten them with that would cause them to break and surrender to him. We suggested that they might want to take some notes as the story presented itself, but let them know that they woulin't be able to include everything as they retold what they had heard. We hit the high points of the

story--information about Oceania and Winston Smith's job, the love affair and its symbolic rebellion against Big Brother's ideology, the eventual discovery, the punishment of the traitors, the aftermath. Students wrote their summaries and returned the next day to tell those stories to each other.

This more complicated version of the child's game of "telephone" taught students several valuable lessons about composing:

1. Strategies of organization--beginnings, middles, ends--are set by the form of the narrative itself, but developed by them as they retell the story.

2. General and specific ideas occur naturally as they both tell details of the story and attempt to move to the next point by generalizing.

3. Retellings of the same plot can take many different forms.

This last was perhaps the most striking and the most useful fact students discovered. As they read their re-tellings to one another, they saw how what one listener had emphasized, another had ignored, how one listener had developed a detail they they themselves had merely mentioned. What was most surprising to them was that all the stories were successful; that is, they all transferred effectively the story they had listened to to other listeners. Students learned although they had all listened to the same plot, they listened <u>for</u> different, though equally valuable, specific details and generalities. Their listening for, then, determined the form, style, and content of the responses they wrote.

A couple of brief examples of opening paragraphs will serve to illustrate this point:

> Winston Smith sits in his few spaces that's called his work area. He knows he must do everything right because Big Brother is always watching. The Ministry of Truth is where he works. It's not really truth, it's lies, because everything in Oceania means

the opposite. He works there in the records department destroying the past, making sure everything Big Brother says is true and recorded.

This is the story about George Orwell's famous book 1984. The book deals with two main characters. Big Brother, who is the party, the dominant one in power of everyone more like the president of the United States except with greater power. Winston is the second, who works for Big Brother in his ministry of truth. Now in 1984 the Earth is completely different from now. It is divided into three countries--Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. Big Brother is in control of Oceania and his picture is everywhere, on posters, coins, and even watching you in your cubic room that is considered home.

Our success in having students recognize in this external way the reader-voice as they listened for the story of 19184 in the teacher's retelling and in the re-retelling of their classmates led us to assign a more difficult task that would attempt to have students listen for the writer-voice of a short story and determine what it demanded from them as readers.

The story we chose was Dorothy Parker's "You Were Perfectly Fine," a very short, funny and bitter little tale of the woe that attends the inabililty of a man and woman to communicate honestly. The two characters discuss the events of a party the night before where the man has become so drunk that he can remember nothing, and the plot develops through his date's reminding him of his successively more embarrassing activities, all the while assuring him that he was "perfectly fine." The story culminates with her revelation of a promise he has made to her in the park, and with his inability to do more in response than request a drink to counter the "collapse" he feels coming on. Parker tells this story almost entirely through the dialogue of Peter and the girl, and since neither character is at all frank about feelings or motivations, their personalities are not ordinarily clear to students whose skill in recognizing the writer-voice through their own reader voice is limited at best.

To counteract the difficulties in getting past the untruthful conversation between the two characters, we played a tape of the conversation read by two of our colleagues. Their voices revealed to the listeners in the class the real feelings of the two characers that are implied by the writer-voice on the page--the man increasingly uncomfortable and making the pretense of remembering his promise; the woman determinedly cheerful and cheerfully determined to hold the man to his promise. The writer-voice demands that readers hear through the dialogue and listen for clues about motivations and about the writer-voice's ironic intention. For sophisticated readers, hearing that kind of writer-voice presents few difficulties. Our less sophisticated and fluent readers would not have overheard the ironic writer-voice lurking behind the dialogue they read. But the tape allowed them to listen for that voice.

Students listened to the tape as they followed the written story and then began to discuss their speculations about the relationship between the two characters. They wrote a first response that expressed an opinion about which character they felt more sympathy for and why. Later, they listed adjectives to describe each character, and then combined some of the male/female adjectives to make a statement about men and women: "When men are guilty and foolish, women are strong and manipulative." The final assignment was to have students write about relationships between men and women using the characters in the story and their own experience or observation as support. Had we begun here, students would have been unable to accomplish an assignment that required them to "hear through" the writer-voice on the page to the character's feelings and the writer's ironic comment upon them. But by beginning with the oral reading to hear the writer-voice, and by listening for details and generalities to make their own conclusions, students were able to complete their tasks with some success. As they read rough drafts aloud, their listeners commented just as they had

upon the tape, and students heard how their own writer-voices transferred to their listeners.

After considering this notion of using the auditory dimension to provoke some consciousness about composing acts, I designed an assignment this semester that carried the gossip-game two steps farther. I told my students the story of King Lear and asked them to listen and retell, just as the earlier group of students had in the 1984 assignment. After they listened, wrote, listened to each other and commented, I asked them to write a sentence or two that generalized about what they felt the writer-voice seemed to be trying to tell them. Finally, I asked students to begin with those generalizations and write a paragraph that explained why that general statement fit into their retellings. I've given you a response from one of the class members.

Unlike many of his classmates who described in vivid detail the battles and the "vile jelly," Leonard concentrated on parent/child relationships, and his generalization clearly derived from the story he retold. His final paragraph takes the general statement "actions speak louder than words," and explains just how he decided upon it. Leonard has the beginning of an expository essay here, that proceeded from his own written narrative, that in its turn was preceded by his listening for that narrative. This assignment follows the sequence of stages of response from subjective through transitional toward objective stances, but it begins a step further back by allowing the oral and the aural to find a place in the composing process.

What we learned with our basic writing students and what is now being supported by people like Richard Larson, is that listening is composing. All of us who teach composition should want to teach listening. When students learn that they listen for, they begin to hear their own voices as they compose.

Listening As An Act of Composing
Katharine Ronald
Hephzibah Roskelly

"Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers--to read as listeners--and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me."

Eudora Welty, One Writer's Beginnings

"Actions Speak Louder than Words"
Leonard

William Shakespeare's story, "King Lear," gave some detail examples of the expression, "Actions speak louder than words." King Lear's daughters, Regan and Goneril, told the king exactly what he wanted to hear, to satisfy his desires and to gained the reward for this deed. Regan's and Goneril's actions through-out the story didn't show the love that they proclaim for him. But Cordelia, the king youngest and favorite daughter, who refused to tell the king of her love, show her affection to him when she went to his side after he was force into the woods by the other daughters. The same holds true for Gloucestor and his two sons, Edgar and Edmond. But Edgar showed his love for his father through the action of going to Gloucester's side after he was banish from his home by Edmond. This saying, Actions speak louder than words," is true even today, because this is one of the ways I use to determine the well-meaning of others.

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